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SUBJECT: CATHOLIC CLERGY SPEAK OUT BEFORE ELECTIONS

REF: 06 ASUNCION 1057

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Eight Catholic clergy members comprising the Paraguayan Episcopal Conference (CEP) issued a joint manifesto March 14 outlining their political positions in the run up to the April 20 national elections. They expressed opposition to electoral fraud, political patronage, vote buying, and the presidential candidacy of former San Pedro bishop Fernando Lugo, and also made a pitch for constitutional reform. Although Paraguayan voters hold the Church in high regard, the CEP's political manifesto may not hold much sway with voters April 20. END SUMMARY.

¶2. U) Eight Catholic clergy members comprising the Paraguayan Episcopal Conference (CEP) -- including six bishops -- issued a joint manifesto March 14 outlining their political positions in the run up to the April 20 national elections, including their opposition to electoral fraud. They argued that public officials should avoid altering election results. The clergy specifically stated that elections tribunals must remain independent and objective in order to ensure the credibility of the electoral process. Citing the examples of Colorado presidential candidate Luis Castiglioni and Liberal vice presidential candidate Federico Franco, they warned that fraud could be alleged after April 20 due to discrepancies between pre-election polls heavily favoring certain candidates and election results.

¶3. (U) CEP members asserted their opposition to political patronage and "vote buying." They wrote, "Our perverse political culture is the root of the ills of our democracy. We must eradicate this corruption of playing politics based on patronage, favoritism, and impunity." The bishops argued that the "vast majority of the electorate, especially in rural areas, do not choose," but rather "are herded to polls by political operators who buy their votes." The clergy stated that political candidates must stop interfering in government affairs by favoring or removing public officials based on party loyalty or paying public employees to campaign on their behalf. They argued that political parties should stop using public funds for political campaign purposes and refrain from buying votes.

¶4. (U) The clergy also chimed in on the political status of Fernando Lugo, former bishop of San Pedro and now leading presidential candidate, affirming that the Church still considers Lugo a Catholic bishop. (NOTE: The Church appointed Bishop Adalberto Martinez Flores to replace Lugo as bishop of San Pedro in February 2007 following Lugo's resignation in December 2006. END NOTE.) They noted, however, that separation of Church and state prohibits the Church from halting Lugo's campaign. They affirmed that the Church "does not endorse any candidacy for the political leadership of the country."

¶5. (U) CEP members also made a pitch for reforming the 1992 Constitution to better balance the executive, legislative and judicial branches. They argued that political parties exert too much power in government and that the constitution vests too much power in Congress and the executive branch. They advocated for a new constitution that would encourage the executive branch to serve the people rather than special interests, enable a strong and independent judiciary, and entice Congress to pass "better" laws.

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: Although voters hold the Church in high regard (reftel), the CEP's political manifesto may not hold much sway with voters in the upcoming election. The Church, one of the relatively few neutral and objective players in Paraguayan society, exerts little political influence in comparison with the political parties now actively maneuvering to capture votes. END COMMENT.

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